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### Scotland's Global Impact

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## SCOTLAND'S GLOBAL IMPACT

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EWEN A. CAMERON

The recently refurbished Eden Court Theatre in Inverness proved a splendid venue for an October 2009 conference on the theme of 'Scotland's Global Impact'. Given the venue, and given the fact that the conference's organisers included the University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute (UHI), it was significant that the event was promoted in the columns of the local newspaper, the venerable *Inverness Courier*. The *Courier* has always had distinctive opinions and, when its editorship was in the hands of successive generations of the Barron family, it voiced those opinions very forcefully. Among the paper's targets over the years was the idea of providing the highland capital with the riverside theatre that became Eden Court—a project which, the *Courier* argued, would cost more than local ratepayers could afford. Still more remarkable was the *Courier's* opposition to the notion of a university for Inverness and for the north of Scotland.

During the early 1960s Inverness was amongst the towns which presented a case for the establishment of a new university to the University Grants Committee (UGC). The idea of establishing a university in Inverness had a long pedigree. In 1953 the idea of a university had been referred to as 'a possible asset to the Highlands and would be a distinct possibility if Inverness Burgh continues to increase its population over the next twenty years at the same rate as in the past'.<sup>1</sup> A decade later, local promoters of the idea were positively evangelical in their belief in the value of providing the town with a new institution of higher education. One local politician argued:

what we wish to stress is the certainty, in our view, that in inviting a University to Inverness we are inviting it to a region that has a long period of development in front of it, and an ever-growing community that would be greatly stimulated by its presence.<sup>2</sup>

Not so much a sceptic as an outright opponent was the octogenarian editor of the *Inverness Courier*, Evan Barron. Throughout 1963 and 1964, in a series of

ever more strident editorials, he argued that a university in Inverness would be a byword for parochialism. Writing of 'Highland Students' needs' he argued:

To doom them to receiving their Higher Education in their native Highlands, at a University in Inverness, would be to ensure a breed of narrow-minded, parochial graduates who would be of little good to the Highlands; to their fellow Highlanders, especially to any of the younger generation whom they came to instruct; to themselves; or to the University. . . . The Highland capital is the last, not the first, place in which to establish another University.<sup>3</sup>

Barron was not content with producing splenetic editorial columns for his readers but even went to the lengths of sending copies of these to the UGC; perhaps noting that among the criteria for university location was 'moral support' from the locality, he was explicit that his objective was to counter 'the impression that everyone in Inverness and the Highlands is in favour of a University in Inverness'.<sup>4</sup>

The UGC decided that Stirling had the best claim for the new university and those who campaigned for Inverness were disappointed. Whether Barron's opposition was a material factor in the decision is difficult to judge, but this brief foray into the recent history of the town helps to set the context for the 'Scotland's Global Impact' conference and provides some evidence that an event of this kind was significant in the intellectual history of the region – demonstrating, as it does, that there has been considerable progress since the debates of the 1960s. The UHI Millennium Institute is a more ambitious and diverse institution than that envisaged by the advocates of university expansion in the 1960s. Even in a period in which public funding for higher education is likely to become increasingly tight, it is set to play a significant role in the life of the north of Scotland, not only through its formal courses but through its engagement with the public. While this will help to counter Barronite accusations of parochialism, UHI will need to remain alive to the potential dangers of confusing the roles of higher education institution and economic development agency. The dictates of academic freedom central to the former are not always compatible with the objectives of the latter.

What is the value of an academic conference? We could adopt the cynical view of the narrator of one of David Lodge's academic farces who noted that the 'whole academic world seems to be on the move. Half the passengers on transatlantic flights these days are university teachers. . . . the conference circuit [is] a way of converting work into play, combining professionalism with tourism, and all at someone else's expense. Write a paper and see the world!'<sup>5</sup> The opposite end of the spectrum would be the recent attempt to assess the economic impact of 'Scotland's Global Impact'. Two thirds of respondents to a survey of conference attendees suggested that it was the 'only reason' or the 'main reason' for their visit to Inverness in October and the conclusion of the assessment was that the Highland Homecoming Events, of which the conference was one, had a significant – and positive – economic impact.<sup>6</sup> The academic profession has to

be concerned about the 'impact' of its work and of events in which it participates, as this will be one of the criteria for the distribution of research funding which will follow the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF). Although the REF might take us back to the cynicism of Professor Morris Zapp in *Small World*, it is legitimate to ask about the lasting effect of an event like 'Scotland's Global Impact' but to couch the question in intellectual, as opposed to economic, terms.

The conference was introduced by Bruce Crawford, MSP, the Minister for Parliamentary Business. In a wide-ranging script he missed the point of an academic conference by suggesting that the delegates were gathered to 'celebrate' Scotland's global impact. It is trite to point out that the purpose of the conference was to be critical and sceptical of the complexities contained in the notion of 'Scotland's Global Impact'. There is a danger of succumbing to an uncritical view of Scotland's place in the world. One version of this refers to the benign and progressive contribution which Scots and Scottish institutions made to the development of the modern world. Other perspectives merge Scottish intellectual development in the eighteenth century and themes of religion, education and emigration into the idea that Scots were responsible for the development of modernity.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, a more critical tone was set by the first academic contribution of the day by Professor John MacKenzie. In a sweeping assessment of 'Scotland and Empire: ethnicity, environment and identity', themes which he has done so much to highlight during his scholarly career, he reminded us that research on this topic can often lead to 'disagreeable answers' about the role of Scots in the British empire. It is an indication of the growing maturity of Scottish historiography that so much recent work has been devoted to imperial issues in Scottish history, and these issues were fully represented in the conference. That this was so serves to make the point that Scottish imperial activity was predicated on the centrality of Scotland to the development of the United Kingdom in the period after 1707. It is useful to compare and contrast Scotland and Ireland in this area. Irish historians have begun to wrestle with their country's involvement in the Empire, even after 1922, just as they have begun to explore the contradictions between Ireland's imperial involvements and its much more discontented role in the United Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Unionist Scotland together with Scottish participation in empire are sometimes forgotten in the rush to proclaim the inevitable break-up of the United Kingdom.

The closing session of the conference returned to one of the most disagreeable issues of all: slavery. Professor Tom Devine asked why Scottish involvement in slavery, especially in the Caribbean, has been elided in the Scottish memory of empire. He noted that even in 2007, the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British empire, there was relatively little attention paid to this aspect of Scottish history; certainly far less than to the circumstances surrounding the Union of 1707, the tercentenary of which fell in the same year. Although recent

academic work has paid some attention to this theme, the concentration has been on Scottish involvement in the campaigns to abolish the trade and later slavery itself in the Empire in 1833.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that there are still very hard questions to be asked about the nature of Scotland's global impact. To what extent was the remarkable economic development of Scotland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century based on profits made from the exploitation of slaves? Issues such as this expose the fatal deficiencies of any tendency to 'celebrate' and underline the importance of critical engagement with the uncomfortable questions in Scottish history.

A plenary lecture by Professor Eric Richards, on the topic of 'Australia and Scotland: the evolution of a long-distance relationship', raised another issue which was central to the concerns of the conference: reciprocity. In the Australian case Professor Richards noted the reciprocal trade between Scotland and Australia over a long period. Evidence of reciprocity is woven into the warp and weft of Scottish history, but scholars have tended to neglect its significance. The global impact on Scotland needs to be dealt with in as much detail as Scotland's global impact and might be given more explicit academic consideration in the future. Examples are not difficult to find. In the second half of the nineteenth century the development of massive sheep farms in Australia and New Zealand had a significant impact on the sheep-farming economy of the Scottish highlands, itself the product of clearances which in their later phase helped to fill emigrant ships to Australia. Similarly, the Dundee jute industry was undercut by the development of competitors in Calcutta who could pay their workers even less than the wages paid by Dundonian jutemasters to their female labour force.<sup>10</sup> More positively, one could point to the way in which the development of railways in the Empire, especially in India, helped to stimulate companies which manufactured locomotives, especially the North British Company of Springburn in the north of Glasgow.<sup>11</sup> We can even return to Inverness to note an example both of the way in which the tentacles of Scotland's global connections were very long and the ability of the Empire to strike back. When the City of Glasgow Bank collapsed catastrophically in 1878, partly due to injudicious investments in Australia and the American west, one of the consequences was the collapse of the Caledonian Bank in Inverness.<sup>12</sup> One hyperbolic local commentator compared this event to the clearances in its impact on the economy of the highlands.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most interesting connections made during the conference was James Fraser's exploration of the way in which empires have affected Scotland over a very long time period. Scotland's experience of having a major colonial empire on its doorstep, sometimes closer, was very important in early Scottish history. In considering the question 'Are we British or not?', Dr Fraser noted how the position of southern Scotland as an ex-Roman territory gave the peoples of that region the possibility of claiming Roman identity and he highlighted the significance of Christianity as a part of Rome's legacy in Scotland. It is interesting to compare the position of the territory which later became Scotland on the

margins of the Roman empire with what has been suggested was the central place of Scotland in the British empire. The exploration of the long term influence of imperialism on Scottish history is a theme which might be fruitfully explored.

Perhaps the principal way in which Scotland's global impact can be examined is through an assessment of the movement of people to and from the country. Although the conference was about much more than the history of population movement, this important theme was addressed by a range of papers. David Ditchburn reminded delegates that in the late middle ages Scotland ceased to be a land of immigrants and became a land of emigrants. This was a profound shift of emphasis and Dr Ditchburn provided an analysis of the scholars, craftsmen, labourers and vagrants who made up the stream of people leaving Scotland for Europe in the late medieval period. In the same session Steve Murdoch suggested that contact with Europe in the early modern period was not confined to the movement of people. The movement and exchange of ideas, especially religious ideas, requires further exploration. The theme of movement of people to Scotland and within Scotland was addressed by two speakers at the opposite ends of the chronological spectrum. Professor Dauvit Broun analysed the migration of Gaels to Pictland and touched on the impact of the Viking invasion on the Pictish language. Dr Philomena De Lima, on the other hand, dealt with recent migration of people from eastern Europe to Scotland, a neat inversion of the early modern links explored by her UHI colleague David Worthington. This is an area ripe for future study as the literature on ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom pays little attention to rural society, a neglect matched by the literature on rural society which rarely acknowledges ethnic diversity.

Although the fact that the conference was able to move well beyond the traditional lament for Scottish and highland emigration was one of its major strengths, the movement of people in the great age of demographic upheaval from the middle of the eighteenth century to the late 1920s could not be ignored. The variety of responses to emigration, immigration and return migration was a central theme of this strand of papers. One thinks of the contrasting images presented by William McTaggart in his series of paintings which deal with this issue. The brightness and optimism of his *The Coming of St Columba* (1895) can be contrasted with the more sombre tones of his depictions of scenes of emigration, notably in the dark and heavy sky in his *The Sailing of the Emigrant Ship* (also from 1895).<sup>14</sup>

The paradox of Scottish emigration has been well aired in recent historiography. It refers to the seeming contradiction that Scotland was simultaneously producing emigrants (around 2 million between 1815 and 1914) and attracting immigrants. Further, the distinction between Scotland as an urbanised and industrialised society and many of the other countries, such as Ireland, which had large emigrant streams, is also notable.<sup>15</sup> It strikes this writer as equally paradoxical that the popular view of emigration continues to be dominated by a sense of grievance and a close association with the Highland

Clearances while the global visibility of the Scot which arose, at least in part, from emigration is celebrated. The paradox deepens further when one considers that from the 1850s onwards – and particularly in the 1920s – there was significant official promotion of emigration from Scotland as a means of adding to the strength of the Empire. If imperial augmentation could be taken as a positive element of Scottish emigration there was often deprecation of the movement of people to the USA which was seen as a rival of and a threat to the Empire. To take another Inverness example to illustrate the point, this was a favourite theme of Duncan Campbell, the remarkable editor of the Conservative weekly published in the town, the *Northern Chronicle*, and a man who had himself lived in South Africa.<sup>16</sup>

Highland emigration was only a small part of the story of Scottish population movement and emigration was only a part of the long and complex process of clearance. Indeed, in the early phase of clearance landowners did as much as they could to prevent people leaving. Nevertheless, on occasion the sense of grievance surrounding highland emigration could be referred to in slightly more positive ways, the best example being Willie Ross's justification for the establishment of the Highlands and Islands Development Board in 1965. Ross remarked that '[t]oo often there has been only one way out of his troubles for the person born in the highlands – emigration.'<sup>17</sup> It is also striking that the Labour government of the 1960s took a critical attitude to the policy of promoting emigration, fearing that a loss of population, especially those with relevant skills, would compromise their plans for the economic development of Scotland.<sup>18</sup> The long history of attitudes and responses in Scotland to emigration would be a fruitful topic for further research now that the narrative of the Scottish diaspora has been worked over in such empirical detail.

In the course of his paper on Scots in early modern Europe Steve Murdoch confronted another 'disagreeable question' when he discussed the way in which perceptions of Scotland in that period were dominated by images of a poverty-stricken and worthless place. Such negative external perceptions of Scotland are another way of taking a more critical approach to the theme of Scotland's global impact. There are many cases in which external observers' views of Scotland were less than flattering. Land reformers of the late nineteenth century, for example, regularly pointed to Scotland as a case where the contrasts between poverty and luxury were at their most marked.<sup>19</sup> Although the theme of Scotland's imperial connections are often cited as a source of strength and confidence there was also on occasion a feeling of vulnerability. Accepting the freedom of Glasgow as Prime Minister in 1907, Henry Campbell Bannerman, a Scottish politician with a notably critical approach to the imperial mission, noted that

Here and elsewhere today you have the spectacle of countless thousands of our fellow-men, and a still larger number of children, who are starved of air and space and sunshine, and of the very elements which make a happy life possible.

What is all our wealth and learning . . . if the men and women on whose labour the whole social fabric is maintained are doomed to live and die in darkness and misery in the areas of our great cities?<sup>20</sup>

Two years earlier, in the course of his triumphant general election campaign, his rhetoric soared uncharacteristically.

We desire to develop our own undeveloped estate in this country, to colonise our own country – to give the farmer greater freedom and greater security in the exercise of his business, to secure a home and a career for the labourers, who are in too many cases cut off from the soil. We wish to make the land less of a pleasure ground for the rich and more of a treasure house for the nation.<sup>21</sup>

This might be read as a criticism of emigration, or, at least, a recognition that there were alternatives to it.

The feeling of vulnerability was echoed by Lord Rosebery, who was on the other side of the divide in the Edwardian Liberal party occasioned by attitudes to the Empire. Rosebery feared that the 'slums and rookeries' of urban Scotland were creating conditions inimical to the rearing of an 'imperial race'. Although Scotland's global impact may be difficult to find in the political context, it is not hard to locate examples of the impact of imperial and global themes on Scottish politics. This has not been prominent in recent work. The tendency to consider political history as a march towards home rule has sometimes led to an inward looking emphasis which is less evident in social, economic and cultural history.

This article began by reflecting on issues surrounding the venue for the 'Scotland's Global Impact' conference. That venue, Eden Court Theatre, also points to the inescapability in a Scottish context of imperial and global impacts. The roads surrounding Eden Court were planned in the nineteenth century by a remarkable Scottish family with highland and imperial connections. Sir Alexander Matheson purchased land on the River Ness's left bank in the late 1850s and laid out a series of streets, including Ardrross Street, which runs from the river to the main westward route out of Inverness, and Perceval Road, about a quarter of a mile to the north.<sup>22</sup> The names of these streets reflect both the Matheson family's Ross-shire origins, in the case of Ardrross Street, and their political connections, in the case of Perceval Road – Sir Alexander's third wife being the daughter of the early nineteenth-century prime minister, Spencer Perceval. Sir Alexander was the nephew of Sir James Matheson and both men were partners in Jardine Matheson which was deeply involved in the opium trade and in the development of Hong Kong after the first Opium War, 1839–42.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the Invernessian traveller to Hong Kong cannot escape noticing the similarity of the street names in the two places and be aware of the fact that they arise from the commercial activities of the same family.

There is, of course, a disagreeable element to the activities of the Matheson family. No less a commentator as Benjamin Disraeli characterised Matheson as



a ‘dreadful man! Richer than Croesus, one McDrugg, fresh from Canton with a million of opium in each pocket, denouncing corruption and bellowing free trade.’<sup>24</sup> The Matheson connections with the opium trade would be raised in Inverness politics at the General Election of 1859, at which he was elected as MP for the Burgh. The more radical of the local newspapers commented:

had Mr Matheson been still deriving profit from the [opium] trade he would have laid himself open to a most serious objection to being sent up to parliament as a legislator on questions relating to India. Even as it is, his fitness to give an impartial vote on such questions must be a matter of grave doubt.<sup>25</sup>

Matheson, it should be said, was in other contexts not reticent about his connections with the opium trade. The gateposts at his residence, Ardross House, were adorned with representations of poppies. A later owner of the house had these altered to resemble pomegranates.<sup>26</sup> Attempts of this kind to alter references to unpalatable episodes and themes in the past provide an incentive for critical and analytical approaches to history. ‘Scotland’s Global Impact’ was successful in bringing to a wider public audience research which has been well known in university seminar rooms and academic conferences. It is important that this engagement is continued and that this successful conference is regarded as an introduction rather than a conclusion.

### Notes

1. Edinburgh, National Archives of Scotland [NAS], DD12/913, Royal Burgh of Inverness, Town and Country Planning Act, 1947, Development Plan, Survey Report, 3 February 1952.
2. London, The National Archives [TNA], UGC7/237, Memorandum by Provost Robert Wotherspoon.
3. *Inverness Courier*, 12 May 1964.
4. TNA, UGC7/239, Evan M. Barron to John Wolfenden, 13 May 1964.
5. David Lodge, *Small World* (London, 1984), 231.
6. Ekos: Economic and Social Development, *Highland Homecoming: Economic Assessment Impact* (Glasgow, 2010).
7. A variety of polemics have been published on these themes over the years. They range from, but are not confined to, Andrew Dewar Gibb, *Scottish Empire* (London, 1937) to Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots Invention of the Modern World* (London, 2001). The latter was referred to by Bruce Crawford, the former was written by a founding member of the party which he represents, the Scottish National Party.
8. T. M. Devine, *Scotland’s Empire, 1600–1815* (London, 2003); Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire* (Edinburgh, 2001); Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2000); Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2000); Keith Jeffrey, *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester, 1996).
9. Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery* (Edinburgh, 2006); see also an important book by another Invernessian, Douglas J. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750–1820* (Manchester, 2005).

10. Gordon T. Stewart, *Jute and Empire: the Calcutta Jute Wallahs and the Landscapes of Empire* (Manchester, 1998).
11. R. H. Campbell, 'The North British Locomotive Company between the wars', *Business History*, 20 (1978), 201–34.
12. John Forbes Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and his Business Network, 1823–93* (Woodbridge, 2003).
13. *Celtic Magazine*, February 1879, 148.
14. Lindsay Errington, *William McTaggart, 1835–1910* (Edinburgh, 1989), 105–14.
15. T. M. Devine, 'The paradox of Scottish emigration', in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Scottish emigration and Scottish Society* (Edinburgh, 1992), 1–15.
16. *Northern Chronicle*, 13 April, 1 June, 27 July 1881, 20 December 1882, 23 January, 4 June, 16, 30 July, 19 November 1884; this was also a theme in other Conservative newspapers in Scotland, see, for example, *Edinburgh Courant*, 23 March 1881.
17. *Parliamentary Debates*, 5th series, vol. 708 (House of Commons), col. 1095, 16 March 1965.
18. See the material in NAS, DD 12/1988, 1989, 2022; SEP17/19, 101, 102, 147, 148.
19. Henry George, 'The "Reduction to Iniquity"', *Nineteenth Century*, 16 (1884), 146.
20. *Glasgow Herald*, 26 January 1907.
21. *The Scotsman*, 22 December 1905.
22. *Inverness Courier*, 8 September 1864.
23. Maggie Keswick, *The Thistle and the Jade* (London, 1982).
24. Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil; or, The Two Nations* (1845, reprinted Harmondsworth, 1980), 74.
25. *Inverness Advertiser*, 26 April 1859.
26. This point was raised by a heckler at the conference. He seemed to be in a state of denial about the Mathesons' connection with the opium trade. The family did not make its fortune by trading in pomegranates.